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High and Ashland East Side

Robert G. Ingersoll

A Memorial Address by Channing
Severance

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:—

When Robert G. Ingersoll paid the debt of nature and disappeared from the haunts of men, to be seen and heard no more to the end of time, the world lost its greatest orator and one of the most remarkable men that ever trod the surface of this old earth. With his death and disappearance, one of the greatest minds, one of the gentlest and kindest natures that ever existed in human form, bid an eternal farewell to these material scenes and environments. As he passed from the mystery of life into that of death, the curtain fell upon a career with which history will insure an influence and a memory as long as history is read, or future generations take an interest in the deeds and doings of their predecessors. As the history of the world is the history of great men, there is no more doubt about his retention of a permanent place on its pages than there is for the supposition that a time will come when oratory will lose its charms, and the honest efforts of heart and brain to increase the joys of life and lift higher the human race in the scale of being, will pass without appreciation and approval. As long as the human heart throbs with kindness and sympathy; as long as mental freedom is prized as a blessing, and the right to think and speak every sincere and honest thought is held in due regard, the name and works of Robert G. Ingersoll will not sway and influence those who come after us. Great thoughts are endowed with immortality; and in the realms of intellect the minds of the future will, as they do today, see and recognize the acme of life's possibilities.

There never lived a combination of great heart and great brain that was without power to reach beyond the grave and play a prominent part in the affairs of men, and we can no more cut loose from the influences of the past than we can under the endless chain of cause and effect that runs all through Nature. Every genius who has played his part in human affairs has left imperishable influences that will forever stimulate men to action and induce others to try and excel in accomplishments. The poets, the statesmen, the philosophers, the orators, the musicians, and the warriors have all left these influences; and the youth in every land has found his ideal from some of them, and begun life with the hope and the desire of emulation.

Under the stimulating influence of historical deeds, the human race is spurred onward, and it rises higher in the scale of existence as century follows century in the endless procession of the years.

Men of genius are not every day products of Nature, and a century of time seldom produces more than one can count on the digits of his hand. In all antiquity the world has produced but one Shakespeare, whose intellect was likened by our later genius to an "Ocean whose waves touched all the shores of thought." A high compliment, indeed, and one such as no other man ever paid him, because it required an Ingersoll to produce the expression; and I now make the assertion and challenge denial with the proof, that Ingersoll's orations and his literary efforts contain more gems of thought than can be found in those of any other writer known to the world. He stands pre-eminent among all the great minds of the present and the past, as an expressive writer and an orator. His like and his equal have never been seen, and if we form our judgment from the past, never will be. There is a charm of diction and a rhythmic flow of words in all he wrote or said that can be

found nowhere else; and in addition to these, we find ever and at all times the highest grade of philosophy and a strict adherence to rationalism and common sense. The orations of Cicero and Demosthenes, heretofore considered the foremost productions of the human mind, are far from equalling those of Ingersoll's, and by them are cast into the shade. They occupy a high place in our classics, and ever will, but the pinnacle of fame is now held by the oratorical productions of the greatest champion of Freethought the world has ever seen—Robert G. Ingersoll.

As an advocate of Freethought, Ingersoll assumed a position in the realms of oratory never before occupied by the really great historical orators, for their line of thought was some specialty and their object its attainment. Politics, statesmanship and religion, science and philosophy have all had their great oratorical exponents, but in Ingersoll we see a new departure, for his plea and his purpose was to emancipate the human mind from every kind and system of mental slavery. His aim was to insure absolute free thought on every subject that interests or concerns mankind; and in a work of this kind he necessarily found religion and religious advocates his worst enemies and opponents.

Freethought and religion are naturally antagonistic, for religion is surrounded by barriers, beyond which its devotees are forbidden to go, while Freethought sweeps aside all limitations and says there is nothing too sacred for discussion and investigation; nothing knowable that man should not know and become familiar with.

Ingersoll's keynote was "Liberty," and at all times and in all places he was animated by a sincere desire to see what was selected as the title for one of his great lectures—"Liberty for Man, Woman and Child." He knew that freedom of thought was the basis of freedom to act, and that humanity with minds enslaved by creeds and religious restrictions could not be free. He pleaded for light and knowledge; for the substitution of scientific facts for systems of belief, and that felicitous expression found in one of his first lectures, "The Gods," outlined his position exactly. Said he:

"Give me the storm and tempest of thought and action rather than the dead calm of ignorance and faith; banish me from the Garden of Eden when you will, but first let me eat of the tree of knowledge."

He saw how the world had been cursed with blind credulity in all ages; he saw how religion and religious creeds had rested like an incubus on the minds of untold millions; he saw how the world had been enshrouded in darkness and gloom by the false and the baseless dogmas of theology; he saw how the priesthood played upon the hopes and the fears of their ignorant followers, and from the records of history he became familiar with the damnable part that religion has always enacted in human affairs. He read of the countless victims to religious fanaticism, who suffered torture, imprisonment and death for daring to think and have views of their own; and from reliable sources he found, as he asserted, that this world has been a fit place for a gentleman to live in but a comparatively short time.

For a thousand years, that part of the world so unfortunate as to be dominated by the Christian religion, stood still intellectually, and that period of time is appropriately called the Dark Ages. It was not until the 15th century that the light of reason began to shine again through the darkness induced by Christian theology and the tyranny of Popery; and from the time of Bruno, the pion-

eer martyr of Freethought, up to the advent of Robert G. Ingersoll as its champion and defender, the conflict between science and religion was continuous.

There never has been a time when the Christian religion looked kindly on the cold facts of science, or viewed with approval the exercise of man's reason; and there never will be, for a conflict invariably results when reason and religion meet. The church fought the plurality of worlds, as taught by Bruno, the spherical form of the earth and its diurnal movement, as proclaimed by Galileo; put every possible obstruction in the way of science, and as late as the last quarter of the 19th century, condemned, denounced, and protested against the doctrine of evolution, as propounded by Charles Darwin.

Why? Because these men and their facts were not in accord with the Book of Genesis. While the church had power to suppress scientific men and their discoveries, it did so with relentless severity, and when through the general increase of intelligence that power began to wane, it still fought them in every conceivable way and with the old-time manifestation of hatred. The church doesn't want thinkers; it wants believers, for belief and not knowledge is the basis of all religions. For this reason, how the church hates Voltaire, and yet the world has produced but two men who deserve to rank with him as public benefactors and sterling friends of humanity. These two it is almost needless to say in this audience are Thomas Paine and Robert G. Ingersoll. This trinity of names ranks the highest in human history, and will ever so stand among the Freethinkers of this and all other nations.

Without freedom to think and to express thoughts, there can be no intellectual growth and development, and a stationary world must be the result. But such a world is the ideal one of religion and religious systems, for progress is neither wanted nor considered desirable, where inspired writings direct from God exist to guide, influence, and control the inhabitants of the earth. It is assumed by the priesthood and theologians that if God had wanted mankind to know more than the Bible reveals, that book would have contained it; therefore, it is sufficient for our needs as it is.

This has been, and always will be, the fatal drawback to religion, for it anchors thought to so-called sacred writings, and says beyond the word of God we must not go.

For centuries the church and Christianity had their own way, and science, the product of man's intellectual achievements, was not permitted to bloom or blossom. Repression was the universal rule and none but priests possessed the right to think and speak; and woe to him who dared to make use of their self-assumed prerogatives.

The church was so strongly opposed to science that it punished the scientist and philosopher as murderers are punished today—by death—and it did its best to prevent by imprisonment and torture the growth and spread of new ideas, and yet it poses now as the cause of the civilization we now enjoy.

But we KNOW that until science got a renewed foothold, and mankind were enlightened and benefited by its work, this world was the abode of crude superstition and dense ignorance; of cruel and barbaric notions; of merciless intolerance, and unrelenting persecutions. Science has broadened the human mind, and philosophy has insured toleration in opinions, but at what a fearful cost has all this been gained. To realize it we must read history and become familiar with indisputable facts; and when we do, the heart is sickened with horror by the crimes and cruelties of ancient Christians. If we go no further back than the time of Voltaire, we find the wheel and the rack in active use; and the fiendish custom of burning heretics alive was a common occurrence in the century that gave him birth. Though brought up in the bosom of the church and educated by the Jesuits, his great mind rose above the superstitious age in which he lived, and his humane feelings revolted at the

cruelties perpetrated by both the Catholic and Protestant churches. So strongly was he moved by the horrors of Christian civilization, that he resolved to devote his time and talents to the amelioration of his fellow men; and though extreme danger attended such efforts, and his work up to the day of his death was never free from it, he began and carried on a warfare on priestcraft and superstition, the influence of which has been tremendous. His genius lighted up all Europe, and beyond doubt or question did more to elevate the standard of civilization than any writer that preceded him from the dawn of the Christian era. He has well been called the master mind of Europe, and humanity owes to him a debt of gratitude which has been denied and withheld because of prejudice, created and insured by the clergy of all sects and denominations. Christianity has covered him with falsehoods and calumny as a reward for his services to mankind, but that is the manner in which the church has always treated the benefactors of the human race. Show me the name in history of a man who advocated science and philosophy and I will show you one that still receives the condemnation of the churches.

After the great Voltaire, comes Thomas Paine as a well hated and much maligned enemy of Christian superstition, and the work which he did is all sufficient to account for the lies and enmity which the churches bestow upon him. He did more in his "Age of Reason" to knock the props from under Christian theology than any man that preceded him, and the work of Freethought received an impetus from him that was never equaled until the advent of Ingersoll. Thomas Paine used no weapon in his attack on superstition but reason, and from reason he drew all of his conclusions, and yet how the clergy hate him! As they hate him so badly, it naturally follows that they hate reason just as much, for it was reason that gave him his power to demolish their theological schemes and fables. No religion can stand the test of reason, and all religious systems must and do fall before its magic power. Religious faith is nothing but a mental effort to swallow what reason rejects; so the less reason one has, or the less he exercises that supreme faculty of the mind, the more chance for faith in religion or superstition, which, by the way, are interchangeable terms, for as Hobbs, the English Freethinker, once said: "Religion is superstition in fashion, and superstition is religion out of fashion." There is no superstition known to the world that was not once in fashion, for mortal man has worshipped nearly everything from a serpent to the sun, and believed in every absurdity his undeveloped mind could conjure up, and he would be doing the same thing now, without exception, were it not for this faculty, reason, which the clergy so hate and oppose. Without reason to protect him from impostors and their tales of terror, man would still be as big a fool and as great a slave to superstition as he ever was. So it is Reason—and not Religion—that has made the world what it is today, for in the Dark Ages there were no Voltaires, no Paines, no Ingersolls, and superstition flourished without opponents. In view of this fact we must accept the undeniable conclusion that the more religion the world has the greater is human ignorance and misery, and the less it has the more intelligence and happiness do we find. Therefore, every man who combats religion and fights priestcraft is a public benefactor, for by so doing he insures progress, liberty and enjoyment for mankind in general.

Thomas Paine did effective work along these lines, and intellectual growth was rapid and vigorous from the seeds of thought sown by him; but no great and worthy successor destined to yield a world-wide influence made his appearance until back in the seventies, when Robert G. Ingersoll came to the front and demonstrated the possession of brains and genius unequalled by any man in America, or the whole world. A few discourses given in the Athens of

America, sometimes called Boston, resulted in his being heralded as the rising sun across the lecture field of time; and well did he merit the compliment; and well did he preserve his reputation as the foremost orator of the world, until his eloquent lips were made voiceless by the touch of death's cold hand. As an orator, he was the phenomenon of the ages, and I repeat, his equal never lived as far as we know from the records of human speech that have been preserved. In all his numerous lectures and voluminous writings there is not a dull or prosy line. The fire of genius burns in them all, and his great mind seemed to hold an inexhaustible supply of fresh and attractive thoughts. He saw things at a glance, which required study and reflection in others, and his keen perception was fully equalled by his unrivaled powers of expression; and when America's greatest pulpit orator—Henry Ward Beecher—presented him to a New York audience in these words, he said what many thousands of his admirers and good judges of oratory still believe true:

"Now, fellow citizens, let me introduce to you a man who, I say not flatteringly, but with sincere conviction, is the most brilliant speaker of the English tongue in any land on the globe."

Col. Ingersoll's personality was also something remarkable, for the very sight of the man carried an influence that proclaimed superiority and genius, and in his presence no one failed to feel that he had met one of Nature's noblemen.

I first saw and heard him in 1876, and never shall I forget the manner in which he touched and swayed that vast audience in Music Hall, Boston, as he poured forth a volume of oratory, such as that historic city, with its long list of great men and public speakers, had never known before. It was on this occasion that he paid his compliments to the Rev. Joseph Cook, one of the most doughty and determined enemies of Freethought that orthodox Christianity has given us in the last generation. A man like St. Paul, who did not hesitate to lie for the glory of God, and who did knowingly, willfully and maliciously, lie about Col. Ingersoll. It was about that time that Freethinkers were being hounded and persecuted by Anthony Comstock and a coterie of bigoted Christians in this country, under a national law, defined as a statute for the suppression of vice and obscenity, but really aimed at the suppression of Freethought.

Joseph Cook had repeatedly stated in public that Col. Ingersoll was in favor of the circulation of obscene literature; so when Ingersoll came before a Boston audience, and to the city where Cook lived, he met that gentleman's charges in a fitting manner. What a scolding he received! And how that vast audience applauded as Ingersoll stepped to the front of the stage and dramatically drawing his finger across his forehead, said:

"When Joseph Cook asserted that I am in favor of the circulation of obscene literature, he wrote LIAR on the forehead of his reputation."

Never shall I forget the scene that followed, for memory preserves with great distinctness the tumultuous manifestation of approval that then occurred; and when the daily press published in full his remarks the next morning, the Rev. Joseph—who now sleeps with his fathers and has quit lying—must have felt as did the man when kicked by a mule—that something had hit him.

And now while this subject is being touched, I wish to make clear the attitude of Col. Ingersoll on the subject of such literature and the so-called Comstock laws, for Christian lies are still in circulation, and destined to follow him for years, as they have Voltaire, Paine and other opponents of Christian superstition. To do this, his reply to the following statement published in the Boston Journal, seems sufficient. Said the Journal:

"Col. Robert G. Ingersoll and others feel aggrieved because Congress in 1873 enacted a law for the suppression of obscene literature, and believing it an in-

fringement of the rights of certain citizens, and an effort to muzzle the press and conscience, petition for its repeal. When a man's conscience permits him to spread broadcast obscene literature, it is time that conscience was muzzled. The law is a terror only to evil doers."

Col. Ingersoll replied to the editor in these words:

"No one wishes for the repeal of any law for the suppression of obscene literature. For my part, I wish all such laws rigidly enforced. The only objection I have to the law of 1873 is that it has been construed to include books and pamphlets written against the religion of the day, although containing nothing that can be called obscene or impure. Certain religious fanatics, taking advantage of the word 'immoral' in the law, have claimed that all writings against what they are pleased to call orthodox religion are immoral, and such books have been seized and their authors arrested. To this, and this only, I object. Your article gives me great injustice, and I ask that you will have the kindness to publish this note. From the bottom of my heart I despise the publishers of obscene literature. Below them there is no depth of filth. And I also despise those who, under the pretense of suppressing obscene literature, endeavor to prevent honest and pure men from writing and publishing honest and pure thoughts."

It is easy to understand these words, and no truthful or honest man who sees them will ever accuse Ingersoll of such a baseless charge as made by Cook and others; but all men are not truthful and honest, and while Christians hate their enemies, contrary to the teachings of their Jesus, they will continue to lie and to slander them as they always have.

Without determined opposition to the Comstock law, which contains that infinite and elastic word "immoral," every Freethought paper in the United States would have been suppressed years ago, for that was the main object in view when those laws were hurried through Congress in the last hours of its session in 1873. It was fully expected that the Truthseeker, the Boston Investigator, and other leading journals would be driven out of existence, and Comstock, that persistent enemy of Freethought, visited the printers of the Truthseeker and threatened them with arrest if they continued to publish it. He declared it his intention to institute a criminal charge against Editor Benner because of an open letter he wrote to Jesus Christ, but the intention was not carried out when he learned that Col. Ingersoll had said he would defend him if he did. Comstock denounced the Truthseeker as a villainous and blasphemous sheet—but even if it had been, those two words have no more connection with obscenity than religion has with common sense. We have no laws on the statute books of the United States against blasphemy, for this government has no God connected with its machinery, and none is recognized in the Constitution; therefore, such laws do not and cannot exist. Still D. M. Bennett, the editor of the Truthseeker, was destined to endure thirteen months imprisonment, through the machinations of these foes of Freethought, and his offense was the mailing of a dry dissertation on the sexes, by E. H. Heywood, which biased and prejudiced courts on several occasions declared obscene. The book, or pamphlet, advocated more liberty in marriage, and dealt with sex questions, but did not contain a single word that could rightly be called obscene, as does the Holy Bible in many instances; and Charles Devins, then Attorney-General of the United States, declared after its perusal, that it was not an obscene book. But to the penitentiary Bennett had to go because his Freethought paper had offended the Christians. After his imprisonment, a monster petition of 50,000 names was taken to President Hayes by Col. Ingersoll, and that gentleman, after admitting the injustice of Bennett's imprisonment, promised to pardon him, but the Methodist Church got the ear of Mrs. Hayes

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